

My Ministry

Rev. Gabi

Setting: Putting on the robe: looking in the mirror

The first time I put on this robe and prepared to go into the sanctuary of the UU Fellowship in Huntington, more than 12 years ago, I thought, "Oh my God! They'll find out I'm just a poser. I'm making a big mistake!"

I almost didn't leave my office that morning more than eight years ago.....

And to this day, when I put on a robe, or drape a stole across my shoulders and look in the mirror, I still think "now I'm playing the preacher again. How did I ever think I can pull this off?" Every Sunday, during the first few minutes after worship has started, I worry obsessively about having forgotten something important in the order of service. Then, as the time for the sermon approaches, I ask myself why anyone would get up on a Sunday morning to come here to hear ME preach!

Like most ministers I work - on the average - 15-20 hours on a sermon. And despite all the research I've put into each sermon, I always worry that there will be people in the congregation who will find mistakes and errors in what I'm saying. Although I am guaranteed "freedom of the pulpit" in my ministerial agreement - every week it is a balancing act between telling things the way I see them, and making sure I'm not offending anyone..... You see, on one level every one of you comes here with the expectation that the sermon will speak to YOU, that it will inspire YOU, teach YOU something new, make YOU feel good.

I got an example for that at the end of the startup workshop on Friday and Saturday. The Rev. David Pyle gave me a stack of index cards on which the 25 participants had listed their expectations of me; and in respect to my sermons I had the following requests:

- Intellectually stimulating
- Challenging
- Spiritual
- Meditative
- Eclectic
- Informing us how to deal with the mess the world is in
- Peaceful
- Showing us what we can do to fight injustice
- Maybe less talk about the needs of others, but helping us to deal with daily life challenges

By the way, wishes for the whole service also varied:

- Less changes
- Prepare for the needs of the next generation

-Less Christian structured Service

-Don't be afraid of rituals

Sooooo - every morning I am looking at sixty or seventy or eighty people who all expect a service with a sermon that's just right for them. And, I stand behind the pulpit with knees knocking, and fear that fifty or sixty of you will realize I'm just playing the role of preacher.

Whenever I am getting ready for a counseling appointment, I similarly worry that my visitor will expect solutions and wise answers from me. What helps me in such a situation is to remember my very first counseling session, also in Huntington, Long Island. A 14-year old girl named Rebecca had lost her best friend to cancer six months earlier, and her mother had asked Rev. Paul, my supervisor, to talk to her: she was worried because her daughter didn't seem to "get over it". I was very apprehensive - to say the least - when he asked me to take on this case. I had no clue how I could help this grieving girl, or her frustrated mother. However, once I started listening to Rebecca, things almost mysteriously fell into place. I was filled with empathy, and out of deep compassion seemed to ask just the right clarifying questions. The girl had been previously counseled by the Catholic priest of her father's church, a priest who told her she was too young for this kind of deep grief. As a result, Rebecca began to doubt her own feelings, and her own "normalcy". I knew from experience that grief is not limited by age, and helped Rebecca to do some of the necessary, albeit painful, grief work.

This experience showed that actually, I am well-prepared for this role of counselor: more than six decades of life, hundreds of hours of psych and sociology classes at university and seminary and the divine force that works in my life - have enabled me quite well to do this job. And yet, unfailingly the minutes before an appointment are always filled with self-doubt and the fear that I won't play my role well enough this time. My covenant with you is to listen deeply to your sorrows, and accompany you on your journey towards healing.

Another one of the "roles" I play is that of "Chief of Staff" of this congregation. What this means is that in addition to normal supervision of the staff members, I am also expected to make the final decision when it comes to hiring or firing staff. Being Chief of Staff sounded easy when the search committee asked me whether I was prepared for that particular role. Yes, in many respects, I feel confident to do this particular work. In seminary, we spent 2 semesters in a class about church administration; and after having served six congregations, worked with 8 or 10 different Board Presidents and groups of lay leaders, and supervising staff in my last 3 congregations, I have learned a lot about it.

Yes, it is certainly easy when hiring someone - if there is a candidate who stands above all others. And it is relatively easy to let go of a staff member who has violated the contract or the covenant established at the beginning of the employment. It gets tricky when said applicant or staff member is in a friendly relationship with members of

the congregation - and it can have disastrous consequences, as most of you know all too well. Since as Unitarian Universalists we govern ourselves under Congregationalist polity, many people - all of them well-meaning I am sure - tried to make the best decisions. This model usually works quite well in fellowships, smaller churches. The most significant learning from the events was that for a congregation of your size, it is advisable to add "Chief of Staff" to the ministerial agreement for a settled minister.

My covenant with all staff members includes my promise to communicate frequently, openly and freely with each; to support their work, to make sure that they know and honor their own limits, and to educate congregants and lay leaders about staff roles and responsibilities whenever necessary. But here I am, once again, in front of my mirror, trying to make sure I had the "professional" look for this new role; and thinking to myself: "Good grief, what am I getting into?!?! Why didn't I stick with interim ministry?" Nevertheless, my covenant with you is to make all staff decisions objectively, and to the best of my knowledge.

Why do the questions: "What on Earth am I doing here?" or "What role am I supposed to play now?" pop up so often in my daily life as a minister? After all, I have gone through four years of college, six years of seminary, three months of hospital-based clinical pastoral education, a year-long internship, an extravagance of psychological exams, two excruciating appearances before regional and national ministerial fellowship committees of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and an affirmative vote by the congregations that called me.

In conversation with colleagues I learned that most of us struggle with this issue. Galen Guengrich, the Senior Minister at All Souls Unitarian in New York, once answered the question of what he does as a minister with these words: "*I run a not - for - profit organization that has a budget of several million dollars and a couple of dozen employees - and on the weekend I lead worship.*" Of course our scale here at UUCY is much smaller, but the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA expects all ministers to take a role in the governance and administration of their congregations, and urges us to continue specialized training for those tasks after seminary and internship. My covenant with you is to continue my education in all areas of ministry whenever possible in order to be the best possible minister for you.

Rev. Guengrich also got me thinking when he said in one of his sermons that "*as a minister, you bear witness to the lives of the congregants: the lives they lead, and the world they live in.*" In a way, "witness" could be used as a unifying "umbrella" term for the minister. And yet - ministers bear witness in at least four ways: As preachers we bear witness to what is true. As pastors we bear witness to what is broken. As prophets we bear witness to what is right. As spiritual guides we bear witness to what is transcendent.

As preachers, we Unitarian Universalist ministers follow the 16th century Protestant reformers, who used the Christian scriptures to bear witness to what is true. For us

today, the scope of the sermons includes just about everything. We are obliged to bear witness to the truth as we see it - about our lives, our relationships, our aspirations as a religious community, our destiny as a nation, our obligation to the rest of creation and our responsibility to the next generations.

As pastors, we bear witness to what is broken. You probably know that the Latin word "pastor" literally means shepherd. Now of course I'm not saying that UUs are sheep - (more like cats...) but you have a place to turn to when times (or your life) gets tough. Whether your heart is broken or your spirit is wounded, whether you try to recover from a failed relationship or shattered dreams - whenever you find yourselves in a dark night of the soul, you have a pastor to go to. My covenant with you is to respond to your call for help 24/7.

As prophets, ministers bear witness to what is right. The prophet Elijah challenged the people of Israel to a contest between the followers of God and those who worshipped Ba'al. Each side was to prepare an animal sacrifice and invoke their true god to send fire down from heaven to consume the offering. Of course, the God of Israel won the contest, and the people promptly repented. Now, a few thousand years have passed since Elijah, and the role of the gods have changed, but the challenge of the prophet has not! We bear witness to what is right by encouraging you to make the right choice, to choose exemplary virtues, to uphold noble values. My covenant with you is to explore with you the values, ethics, and morals of the world we live in, and to help you find ways to fight against what we perceive as wrong. But there is more: I feel called to carry the role of the prophet beyond the walls of this church, and into the community. I want all of York County to know that here is a church where you can nurture your spirit and help heal the world. Actually, there are several index cards in my pile that expressed that specific expectation. Therefore I covenant with you to carry our message out into the community - whenever and wherever possible.

Ministers are seen by many as a spiritual mediator, a mediator between a perfect God and sinful humanity. In the UU tradition, we bear witness - as your spiritual guides - to what is transcendent. We may guide you in finding your sense of connection to everything. No matter how dire our circumstances, you can find hope in knowing that something is possible beyond what is present. My covenant with you is to be your spiritual guide in a way that fully accepts your spiritual journey and acknowledges your unique needs.

James Luther Adams, who was the leading Unitarian theologian during the early 20th century, wrote an essay titled: "I call this church free." You can find it in our hymnals, number 591. The last 2 lines are: *It is a pilgrim's church, a servant church, on an adventure of the spirit. The goal is the prophethood and the priesthood of all believers.*

Did you know that the word minister is the diminutive form of a Latin word which simply means: "the least one"? I am not a magister, the greatest one; I am a minister,

the least one. I hope that this reminds all of us that I am but one Minister among many. Since we are members of a religious community, who are united by a shared covenant, we are all called to educate others, to help others, to bear witness. In our tradition, we are all ministers now. So, finally, I covenant with you to share my ministry with you in every feasible way. Well, I guess I'm not the only one taking on a role when I come here: You might be a lawyer, but in here you can be a minister; you might be a seamstress, but in here you are ministering to the beloved community; you may be a retiree, a mother, an engineer, a gardener - whatever you are outside of those sanctuary doors, in here you are one of the "least ones" who minister to each other.

May it be so.